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Interview with António Magalhães



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How has the notion of crisis entered discourses about higher education and research?

"Crisis" is indeed a notion rather than a concept. It is an ideograph in the sense that it puts together events, common sense ideas and has the potential to provide meaning to social events and contexts.

The idea of crisis has impinged on higher education and research long before the present crisis. It must be taken into a longer term perspective. In actual fact, in the second half of the last century a "crisis" has emerged in higher education as consequence of the

change in the relationship between higher education and research. In the 1950s higher education was referred to as “university education”, later, with the rise of polytechnic and vocational institutions in European higher education systems, it became “higher education”. In the last decades of the twentieth century “tertiary education” became a common designation for higher education (e.g. OECD documents), with blurred frontiers with post-secondary education. The “name” of the “thing” has major implications for the meaning of higher education and its relation with research. Research and education in modern universities were conceived as being tightly linked. In the Humboldtian and Newmanian narratives on universities, for instance, this linkage was the basis of what was “higher” in higher education. The diversification of higher education as a response to the pressures mass demand for this level of schooling and to the increasing of “external” (i.e. economic sphere) pressures introduced a long term and enduring crisis in higher education identity as form of education. Are teaching higher education institutions (without research) still performing “higher education”? Universities were until recently the main *loci* where research was undertaken. Now it can be developed, and quite efficiently, at research centres that hardly can be pointed out as “higher education institutions”.

The present crisis, due to financial stringency, hardened this enduring identity crisis. In the last decades, under the influence of governance and managerial narratives, such as, for instance, New Public Management, the universities started a move from knowledge centred institutions to service providers institutions, acting firms as role models and, consequently, enhancing managerial processes and structures within institutions. This shift is having major impacts on higher education institutions’ missions and strategies.

Actually, the present crisis is pushing the longer term crisis to its ultimate limits.

How has it been used to construct problems and offer putative solutions in the discourses of politicians, research institutions, universities and the European Union regarding social sciences and the humanities?

The myth of the university as an “ivory tower” produced discourses on the research agenda setting as if universities were not from this world. This myth was replaced by another one: the myth of “relevance”. In the aftermath of Lisbon Strategy, in 2000, political and governance discourses on the importance that institutions - both research centres and universities - for social development have been emphasising the need to link to the economic, industrial and commercial worlds. Michael Gibbons, Peter Scott and Helga Nowotny, to mention only these researchers, identified the shift from Mode 1 to Mode 2 of knowledge production, i.e. the shift from disciplinary based and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake to transdisciplinary and applied knowledge production. As universities and research units are increasingly seen as organizations that must respond efficiently to changes in their environment and the emphasis of funding policies is put on performance based indicators they strive to be both relevant and socially accountable. The European Union has made clear that the governance reform and the funding reform are closely linked.

This has had major impacts on the research agenda setting of social sciences and humanities. The emphasis on social and relevance and on accountability has been pressuring

and reconfiguring the discourses on research and on project design, particularly in social sciences. Social sciences have always been relevant, but now they must produce “value for money”. In turn, research in the field of humanities run the risk of being “irrelevant” under the influence of the prevailing governance narratives and their focus on relevance and accountability.

However, as history has been showing, and as Guy Neave has emphasised, relevance, like treason, is a question of time...

How does the crisis discourse in education and research intertwine with other crisis discourses (cultural, financial, political)?

The present crisis has enhanced the colonisation of academic, scholar discourses by economic and managerial discourses. A brave new semantics has been brought to education and research fields: “entrepreneurship”, “benchmarking”, “good practice”, “good governance”, “efficiency and effectiveness”, “stakeholders”, “performance indicators”, etc. This semantics reflects a new social and political grammar impinging on universities and research centres internal lives. Research has been showing how rectors, deans and directors are reconfigured as managers. Their identity narratives mirror a split - and sometimes fragmentation - of their self-stories between academic and managerial profiles. In turn, under this increasing prevalent semantics and grammar, the academic constituencies - professors, students and administrative staff - are reconfigured as “internal stakeholders”. This of course influences the forms under which research projects are settled and developed as well as it influences the designs of curricula.

The “crisis”, as an ideograph, has increased the hegemony of the economic discourse and its related counterpart, the managerial discourse. However, one should not overemphasise the “passivity” of academics as if they were in a position “under attack” by external discourses (economic and managerial), because significant parts of academic communities were, and are, participating in this discursive reconfiguration of education and research. “How can we know the dancer from the dance?”, Yeats asked...

How is the role of the state in research and education being revised and with what implications? How is the scope of freedom and creative potential of researchers being affected in a context where markets seem to rule?

The role of state has been changing under the influence of new governance narratives. The model of state control was found to be inefficient due to the classic bureaucratic organization and the weight of bureaucrats in policy making. Since the eighties, most of European states moved from the state control model to the supervisory model. The latter is based on the assumption that the more autonomous institutions are the more efficient in their response to the “moving” world surrounding them. The reforms of public administration across Europe followed this trend, education included. Higher education system and institutions, at least in Portugal, were front-runners in the process of attribution of broad autonomy to education institutions.

Under the model of state control, academic freedom, the individual liberty to design one's own teaching and research agendas was guaranteed by the state itself. In turn,

autonomy is attributed by the supervisory state to institutions rather than to individual academics. The freedom to design and manage education and research agendas was put under the attributions of the self regulatory capacity of institutions with obvious impacts on individual academics' priorities.

This new form of governance is visible at the European, national institutional levels and is based on governance instruments (e.g. funding, evaluation) rather than on government programmes. It is also grounded on a strong emphasis on "third party" partners (e.g. industry, commerce, social movements). Additionally, it induces networking as a privileged form of organization and, in some cases, promoting fragmented or shared decision-making processes and structures.

As the governance narratives were hijacked by the neo-liberal discourse on economy and politics (as reflected, for instance, in the New Public Management governance narrative) the potentialities of institutional autonomy run the risk to be restricted to serve the New Jerusalem of relevance, efficiency, accountability and "value for money". Western European states have not only been promoting market regulation in economy and society as a whole but also inside the public systems. Quasi-markets were created inducing public institutions to compete for students and for funding. The assumption is that the more competitive they are the more accountable and socially/economically relevant they are.

In my view, this regulatory context is having major consequences on research and on professors and researchers' creativity and freedom to pursue knowledge. Research must be relevant and fundable; education must attract students and, at least potentially, guarantee to graduates a position in the labour market. How can "irrelevant" research in philosophy or ontology, for instance, or in classical studies expect to be funded? We can develop with our students discourse analysis theories and methods in our classes, seminars and conferences, but can we compete for funding with "evidence-based" projects in the field, for instance, of education policy analysis? I doubt it.

Who drives research policies? The Portuguese Science and Technology Foundation cites Germany as a model and claims that the way it can help the Portuguese scientific community be successful in European calls is by promoting a "greater alignment with the European programmes". To what extent are core countries setting standards, research areas and priorities, and how can that impact on social sciences and humanities, which are context-specific?

In research undertaken at the Centre for Research in Higher Education Policies (CIPES) in 2009-2013 in the framework of a European project (promoted by the European Science Foundation and funded by FCT — the Portuguese Science Foundation), we concluded that European Union policies related to evaluation and funding are promoting a political common grammar, making the case for European governance. Research has shown that the European Union institutions are modeling higher education by disseminating common legitimating policy discourses on higher education and on research policies. It has been recognized by the European Commission that evaluation in higher education (based on the setting up of national agencies and/or quality assurance systems) is a political area of "marked success".

However, the European meta-governance influenced with variable extension and intensity, in the areas of evaluation and funding, European countries, reflecting national specificities. With regard to the funding reforms, national governments appear to articulate the European Union policies and point out to the assumption that in the future the bulk of resources should be provided by non-public sources and adopt performance-based indicators. Along with evaluation, funding reforms are expected to meet the objectives of the EU modernisation agenda.

In this context, the Portuguese Science and Technology Foundation is also promoting a “greater alignment with the European programmes”. However, when looking at the resources and power relations based on national economies, European core countries are not only aligning with European policies but also promoting and nourishing them as they are in a much better position in the wider competition for funding at the European level and for competition in the global higher education market. In my view, context specific education programmes and research projects are at risk to be pulled to the periphery of the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area.

In Portugal there is a widespread institutional pressure towards excellence, translated into the internationalization of research, strong competition and publication in journals with known impact factor. In Portugal, for the social sciences and humanities fields, this means following core countries – Anglo-Saxon ones – and core languages – basically English – and applying for European funding. What are the implications of these priorities for the work of researchers and for the diversity/quality of research?

This is the case of Portugal, Portuguese higher education institutions, research centres and individual researchers and academics. “Publish or perish” is a mantra that is being promoted at the national and institutional levels. Its impact on academic and research activities must be further researched, but the Englishfilia, the need to select adequate scientific journals to publish the results of research, the emphasis on outputs of projects and the quantity of publications needed to have a “proper” evaluation is having major consequences on the diversity and quality of research and its outputs.

In Portugal, for instance, the cooperation with higher education institutions and research centres in Portuguese speaking countries will reflect these trends. I think that it is already resenting that. Cooperation is being increasingly replaced by networking partnerships based on partners’ academic and scientific prestige. Brazil, Angola and Mozambique, to mention only these countries, do not appear as priorities in the strategic plans of most of the Portuguese higher education institutions. On the other hand, the core countries and highly ranked institutions are competing for these market niches.

Finally, the research and education agendas, as already said above, are being colonised by the semantics and grammar of the economic and managerial discourses prevailing in the sector and promoted by the European Union level, the national level and, last but not least, the institutional level. In social sciences, for instance, the specificities of semi-peripheral societies and states are far from the front stage of research agendas.

What examples of resistance to the crisis discourse can you point out? How can alternative forms of governance in education and research be imagined and enacted?

Ronald Barnett reminded that authenticity can only be achieved by confronting inauthenticity. As academics and researchers, we can and we do resist to the negative effects (as far as they are identified as such...) of the hegemony of the practices and discourses based on relevance, accountability, "value for money", etc. But, as already said, one must not forget that academics and researchers are not only playing the game but also, at least some of them, nourishing it. Again, Yeats question comes to mind: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"...

That said, one must not forget that the past regulation and organization of research and higher education should not be idealized. The "ivory tower" never existed, universities and their graduates were always part of the social fabric, economic and political systems. On the other hand, the Humboldtian and the Oxbridge models of universities were elitist, selecting the rulers and the state officers among the ruling classes and groups. Finally, collegial governance might have corresponded to a Republic of Scholars, but it was far from being democratic...

Probably social systems have no exterior, and the way to resist is to advance discourses and practices that promote what is "higher" in higher education, i.e., to educate via research. How can we do that in a higher education mass system? This seems to me an "authentic" question to be answered.

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